

Right or Wrong? Signing state marriage licenses

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A growing number of ministers are refusing to sign marriage licenses. What are the pros and cons of this position?

The clergy refusal is in response to same-gender marriage. Two Protestant pastors urged anti-gay pastors to refuse to perform all weddings that require a state marriage license.

They drafted a marriage pledge published in *First Things*, a journal of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a group that challenges mainline denominations considered too liberal. The institute, founded by Richard John Neuhaus, a conservative Catholic priest, encourages pastors to become involved politically in culture wars while criticizing those becoming politically involved in social-justice issues.

Strange bedfellows

The original pledge drafters believe participating in any wedding as agents of the state somehow supports same-sex marriage.

That position, while not surprising among more conservative clergy, surprisingly is shared by some of the most liberal. A Michigan pastor refuses to sign any marriage license until same-sex couples are allowed to marry, since she feels it would be participating in an unjust system.

Both groups seem to assert marriage was created by God and is an institution controlled by the church. Same-sex marriage advocates and opponents have said government has no business deciding who can and cannot marry. There was no protest among opponents of marriage equality

when the government prohibited same-gender couples from marrying.

The pros of refusing to sign marriage licenses seem to involve clergy protest. While some of their flock may eschew the state sanctioning their union, most want state recognition for both the legal benefits given to married couples in areas such as taxation and the protections given if their marriage dissolves. So, the ministers' protest may work to the detriment of their congregants.

Requiring congregants to marry twice in this era of five-figure wedding extravaganzas might annoy some church members, a major con of the refusal to sign. Many, if not most, couples regardless of their gender composition, want both benefits of state recognition and blessings of their religious community.

No minister can be forced to marry

In our country, no minister can be forced to marry any couple, so why hurt their flock to make a point? As one of the minister's main duties is to preside over life's sacraments and ceremonies, it seems a shame if ministers turn their back on those duties in a fit of political pique.

The conservative pledge may provide a solution in stating: "We will no longer serve as agents of the state in marriage. We will no longer sign government-provided marriage certificates. We will ask couples to seek civil marriage separately from their church-related vows. ..."

Regardless of one's position, an answer may be to "divorce" the civil union contract the state blesses from "marriage" as a religious sacrament. For an official civil union, couples go to the courthouse, fill out required forms, affirm their intent to become legally united and walk out with a document evidencing that they have entered into a civil union. Those who want religious ceremonies are free to have one not involving the state. This would free people of faith to agree to disagree and tackle the issues Jesus

was concerned with.

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